

As contract expires, USW orders steelworkers to stay on the job

Our reporters
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Thousands of steelworkers rallied in Pittsburgh, Chicago and Burns Harbor, Indiana on Tuesday, ahead of the expiration at midnight of three-year contracts covering 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal. As the contract expired, the United Steelworkers (USW) ordered workers to continue on the job without a contract.

ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, is seeking a three-year pay freeze, a two-tier system with reduced pay and benefits for new hires, and cuts in health benefits that will mean a sharp reduction in real income. US Steel, the largest steel company in the country, is demanding cuts in health care for active workers and retirees, along with other cuts, including the elimination of overtime pay after eight hours of work.

There is deep opposition among steelworkers to these demands. The USW, however, is working closely with the companies and the Obama administration to prevent or suppress any struggle, while blocking steelworkers from uniting with other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

On Tuesday, the USW released a statement on its "continue to work agreement" with ArcelorMittal. "We have offered to continue working under the existing terms and conditions while negotiations proceed," the union announced. It stressed that this "is not the same as a contract extension, but demonstrates good faith while negotiations proceed and at least temporarily averts a labor dispute."

The agreement to continue work and not strike allows the companies to stockpile steel to fill orders in the event of a lockout or strike, and the absence of a contract leaves workers vulnerable to arbitrary disciplinary measures and victimization.

Both ArcelorMittal and US Steel praised the USW's

actions. ArcelorMittal issued a statement that it "appreciates and shares the [USW's] commitment to averting a work stoppage" that demonstrates the commitment of both sides to a "mutually beneficial agreement." It added that both the USW and the company "want the same thing—a successful business through the cycle that provides good job security and industry-leading pay for industry-leading performance."

The reference to "good job security and industry-leading pay" is pure sophistry, since the company is demanding deep cuts in pay and benefits. Both the union and the companies are committed, however, to increasing profits by intensifying the exploitation of steelworkers.

The USW's agreement to continue work means first of all the continued isolation of the 2,200 locked out steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI), where negotiations are not set to resume until September 11. The workers have been locked out for more than two weeks.

ATI has continued production through the use of scab workers from Strom Engineering, a firm that specializes in strikebreaking. Tellingly, the *Northwest Indiana Times* reports that Strom Engineering "has posted ads for 'steel manufacturing in the Chicago area.'" This would cover northwest Indiana—which includes US Steel's Gary Works and ArcelorMittal's Burns Harbor mill, which has the largest concentration of steelworkers in the US.

The USW is also working with the other unions to isolate steelworkers from other sections of the working class facing concession demands or working without a contract. This includes 140,000 autoworkers whose contracts with GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler expire in two weeks, on September 14. Like the USW, the

United Auto Workers (UAW) is working closely with the companies to suppress opposition to further cuts in wages and benefits that are being negotiated behind the scenes.

Contracts have already expired for 400,000 US Postal workers, 60,000 Verizon and AT&T workers and tens of thousands of teachers in Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh and other cities. At the beginning of next month, the contract covering 11,200 workers at John Deere will expire.

A central issue facing autoworkers, steelworkers, telecom workers and other sections of the working class is the ongoing attack on health care benefits, which has been spearheaded by the Obama administration. Reports emerged last week that the UAW is working with the companies to set up a union-run health care fund that would be tasked with slashing benefits for current workers.

An estimated 2,000 workers, including many locked out ATI workers, attended the rally in Pittsburgh, coming from throughout Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Clarence, an 83-year-old retiree from Cleveland, Ohio with 38 years as a steel worker, said, "It's not good for the company to demand so much. When LTV [currently International Steel Group] went bankrupt, we lost our pensions. Now they want more co-pays from retirees. The pensions, 401(k)s, health care through the VEBAs and vacations are being tampered with. We have to keep fighting."

Clarence spoke about his role in the 1959 steel strike. "I was on strike for 116 days. That was the big steel strike, all of the steel. There wasn't any welfare, no subsidized food, nothing. That was the greatest sacrifice I ever went through. I was young, so I didn't really think about it."

Decades of hard and dangerous work means retirees face many health problems, even as their pensions and health care have been cut or eliminated outright. "There was no safety equipment" in the 1950s and 60s, Clarence said. "You'd have to shovel that coal, and smell that gas. Sometimes that gas would be so raw, you'd have to walk away from it."

"We're the innocent people, and the innocent people don't always win, but you can fight. That's what we've got to do. So it's a long struggle, and I guess we'll overcome it or we'll keep fighting."

Clarence criticized the role of the unions during the

PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981. "You didn't see one national union step up to these people. Not one." He added, "Today, the unions sit with the owners at the ballgames. So you've killed the union right there."

A retired salary employee from ATI came to the rally to express his support. "I had 43 years with ATI," he said. "I gave the company the majority of my life. When I left, they shook my hand and said that I would be looked after. Five years ago they eliminated my health insurance. That is costing me over \$700 a month. That is a lot of money, especially when you are on a fixed income. On January 1, they cut out our life insurance."

"This was a promise they made with a hand shake. That is how greedy this company is, that they will go back on everything that they promised their employees. People worked hard to build this company, now they want to take away from them what they worked for."



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